

# India's Rise as a Global Power: Case Study of Ukraine-Russia War

Vinay Kaura

## Abstract

Ever since the war in Ukraine broke out, India has maintained its call for a peaceful resolution of conflict without supporting a specific country. New Delhi has been trying to project India as the authentic and committed voice of the developing nations, many of which suffer from higher food and energy prices and the effects of geopolitical tensions. Reflecting New Delhi's growing self-confidence, India has boldly taken the lead to raise the issues being faced by Global South, a category of countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America with vastly similar socio-economic traits.

**Key Words:** India, Russia-Ukraine war, Unites States

## Introduction

Although India has always sought to become a global power, it was long viewed as just a major power in the South Asian region. This changed at the dawn of the new century when India began to assert itself on the global stage. Particularly during the last one decade, India has increased its investment in its economic, military, and diplomatic capabilities. Despite the challenges of a rivalry with Pakistan and competition with China, India has been acquiring the potential to become a global power due to fast-growing economy and vast demographic advantages.

India requires a strong partnership with the United States as it has to fulfill its developmental requirements and also manage myriad challenges effectively on the external front. That is why India has invested a great deal in improving its relationship with the US. However, the two countries have had different approaches to the war in Ukraine as New Delhi has been unwilling to publicly criticize Russian aggression in Ukraine. Yet the Joe Biden administration has been sensitive to India's concerns when it comes to Russia. Washington has taken some time to

realize that as a strategic ally, short of an alliance partner, dealing with India requires different norms and expectations. On the other hand, New Delhi seems to have learnt to make sure that India does not remain content in merely criticizing the existing international order but also provides practical solutions for burning global challenges.

India has demonstrated its ambition to play a greater role in global affairs during the recent Summit of the G-20 in New Delhi in September 2023. At a time when geopolitical tensions are high, India's presidency of the G-20 enhanced faith in the ability of multilateral processes to deliver on global governance agenda. India has successfully underlined its credentials as a leading global player which is capable to shape key global outcomes. The successful outcome of the Summit is indicative of India's ability to balance its historic partnership with Russia while deepening its strategic partnership with Western countries. By announcing plans for a Global Biofuel Alliance and India-Middle East-Europe connectivity partnership in the Summit, India has reminded the major world powers of its ambition to seek a role in global decision-making. With Indian initiative, the inclusion of the African Union in the G-20 has made it more inclusive.

India played the most consequential leadership role in bringing countries together as the differences on the Russia-Ukraine war had captured worldwide attention. Despite geopolitical tensions between the US and Russia, India was able to achieve consensus in having a joint communiqué at the end of the Summit which had remained elusive. The paragraphs on the Russia-Ukraine war did not condemn Moscow for its military actions, but the Western also was satisfied with its wording.<sup>1</sup>

We are living in a bitterly contested world rampant with uncertainties and instabilities. The Ukraine-Russia war has created a political grouping of three different set of nations: those who are siding with Russia, those who have pledged support to Ukraine, and a group of nations hedging their bets. The West has pledged unconditional support to Ukraine in the wake of Russia's invasion. The belief that President Vladimir Putin with Russia's full-scale military aggression in Ukraine has finally crossed a red line in Europe seems widely shared among the Western countries. A key feature of the Western rhetoric against Russia has been that it is not a party to the conflict in Ukraine. Their argument is that the war is between Russia and Ukraine, but whatever the nuances involving the legality on 'neutrality', it can be convincingly argued that the West has significantly intervened on behalf of Ukrainians.

Ever since the war in Ukraine broke out, India has maintained its call for a peaceful resolution of conflict without supporting a specific country. New Delhi has been trying to project India as the authentic and committed voice of the developing nations, many of which suffer from higher food and energy prices and the effects of geopolitical tensions. Reflecting New Delhi's growing self-confidence, India has boldly taken the lead to raise the issues being faced by Global South, a category of countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America with vastly similar socio-economic traits. With its population surpassing 1.4 billion, India has overtaken China as the most populous country in the world. India also surpassed Britain in 2022 in terms of gross domestic product, making it the world's fifth largest economy.<sup>2</sup> India's economic growth has been driven by the global trend toward diversification of global supply chains that has emerged from the US-China strategic competition as well as the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Mearsheimer's controversial arguments**

John Mearsheimer argued that the US provoked a war in Ukraine by viewing Russia as an existential threat, and by promising to bring Ukraine into the security fold of NATO. He believes that Russia cannot be expected to tolerate this and would thus wreck Ukraine as a state. He has criticized the conventional wisdom in the West that Russia had invaded Ukraine to absorb into a 'Greater Russia', arguing that Moscow "was principally concerned with preventing Ukraine from becoming a Western bulwark on the Russian border."<sup>3</sup> As both Washington and Moscow seem determined to achieve their objectives, the dangers of escalation are growing, which "means that the United States might join the fighting either if it is desperate to win or to prevent Ukraine from losing, while Russia might use nuclear weapons if it is desperate to win or faces imminent defeat, which would be likely if U.S. forces were drawn into the fighting." Mearsheimer has also termed the UK, Poland and the Baltic states as "foolish" for pushing the US into stronger action against Russia. Mearsheimer's arguments draw a causal connection between Putin's aggression and humiliations suffered by Russia at the hands of NATO.

Though his views are very popular in Moscow, Mearsheimer is often labeled in Western countries as an apologist for the Putin regime.<sup>4</sup> But it would be incorrect to brand him as a pro-Russian apologist because he was the one who had urged Ukraine not to give up its nuclear weapons in 1993. By terming former president Bill Clinton's argument as "wrong" and "unpersuasive" that Russia should become "the only

nuclear-armed successor state to the Soviet Union” and Ukraine must transfer all of the nuclear weapons to Moscow, Mearsheimer argued that a nuclear Ukraine was “imperative to maintain peace between Russia and Ukraine” because it would deter the Russians to reconquer Ukraine.<sup>5</sup> However, Mearsheimer’s current arguments that Russia does not intend to conquer Ukraine may be belied by Russia’s military actions on the ground. Mearsheimer does not oppose American power projection, asserting that the US cannot afford to let China dominate Asia the way the Western Hemisphere is dominated by the US. Therefore, it is imperative to focus on containing China rather than getting distracted by the dynamics of the Ukraine-Russia war.<sup>6</sup> It is regarding China that his views are compatible with India’s standpoint that the continuation of the war in Ukraine will only push Russia into the arms of China which is neither in New Delhi nor in Washington’s interests in the Indo-Pacific region.

### **Chinese hegemonic designs**

The most undesirable byproduct of the prolonged Ukraine conflict is the breathing space it has given to China to expand its global influence and bring about an image makeover. The geopolitical flux as a result of the prolonged Ukraine-Russia war has allowed Beijing to influence European opinion through accelerated political outreach, with the desire to present itself as a reliable alternative to the US. It has been a time-tested Chinese strategy to play up differences between the European countries.

Chinese State Councilor Wang Yi’s European tour in February 2023 saw him go to France, Germany, Italy, and Hungary. In particular, Hungary was the only east European country chosen for his visit as a pro-China government of Victor Orban is currently ruling the country. Hungary is regarded as one of Beijing’s staunchest European partners, and Orban’s growing ties with authoritarian states, most remarkably Russia and China, have been a bone of contention between Budapest and Brussels.<sup>7</sup> President Xi Jinping’s visit to Moscow in March 2023, the first such since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, was a manifestation of growing bonhomie between China and Russia. Beijing is keen to use the peacemaker card in the Ukraine war to underscore its credentials as a more reliable global power than the US who responds to all complex problems militarily, while China prioritizes dialogue.

Though Beijing’s ostensible neutral stand in the Ukraine-Russia war is widely seen as a tacit support to Moscow, Xi’s projection as a global statesman is aimed primarily at countries in Global South.<sup>8</sup> For both

the US and India, China remains the long-term strategic challenge in the Indo-Pacific. As India increases its global profile, the geopolitical future of South Asia and Indian Ocean will be shaped by growing rivalry between India and China and no longer between New Delhi and Islamabad. As there has been no reduction of military tensions between the two countries following border incursions in summer 2020, it is evident that India and China have vastly differing perceptions on the issue of border dispute. India sees the boundary dispute as a bilateral issue whereas China seems to be viewing it as part of its broader geostrategic competition with the US in the Indo-Pacific.

### **India's evolving position on the Ukraine-Russia war**

Ukraine's Deputy Foreign Minister, Emine Dzhaparova, visited New Delhi in April 2023 to meet Indian officials. Dzhaparova tweeted that she was "Happy to visit the land that gave birth to many sages, saints & gurus. Today, India wants to be the Vishwaguru, the global teacher and arbiter. In our case, we've got a very clear picture: aggressor against innocent victim. Supporting Ukraine is the only right choice for true Vishwaguru."<sup>9</sup> Reminding India of its "additional responsibility" as leader of the G-20, Dzhaparova urged India to play the leadership role "by involving Ukraine in its agenda and helping Ukraine to bring its story."<sup>10</sup> By giving this message, Dzhaparova may have indirectly hinted that the 'Vishwaguru' image that the Modi government seeks for the country will remain imperfect if India refuses to take a strong moral position on the violation of Ukraine's sovereignty by Russia. She also tried to put India in a difficult situation by soliciting an invitation for Zelenskyy to address the G-20 Summit in September 2023.

While New Delhi has expressed its disapproval of the war and repeatedly expressed its concern against the violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity, it has avoided taking a critical position against Russia. The Ukraine war alone is not sufficient to undermine India's historical friendship with Russia, which is based as much on New Delhi's unsustainable military dependence on Moscow as on the anti-colonial strand of India's strategic autonomy doctrine. Thus, India's partnership with both the US and Russia needs to be viewed from the prism of the country's national interests. In the latest foreign policy strategy, Russia has identified both India and China as its main allies in international politics.<sup>11</sup> As Russia has begun to be increasingly isolated from the Western world due to unprecedented economic sanctions, and the Western world has extended full support to Ukraine in its bid to protect its sovereignty, Moscow is facing a hostile NATO at its doorstep.

Consequently, despite growing power asymmetry between the two countries, Russia has opted to further rely upon China as both oppose the US-led global order.<sup>12</sup> But India would never like to be identified as a Russian ally against America. India is clearly aware that Russia cannot win an attritional war as long as the US-led West keeps on providing support to Ukraine.

Considering India's huge energy requirements as the world's most populous country and one of the fastest growing economies, India has been buying huge quantities of discounted oil from Russia.<sup>13</sup> Many Western observers have been critical of India's position on Russia. However, India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, had remarked last year that "Europe has to grow out of the mindset that Europe's problems are the world's problems, but the world's problems are not Europe's problems."<sup>14</sup> This statement was a reflection both of New India's frustration with the West to impose its political preferences on the Global South as well as a strong assertion that India's core interests alone would decide its approach to the war in Ukraine. India's most important foreign policy preoccupation is neither Ukraine nor Russia; it is China. Since this is equally true for the US, it explains America's tolerance of India's continued military and strategic proximity with Russia. India's relationship with the US appears to be the strongest at this moment, and its ties with Russia have also shown continuity. This is undoubtedly a great achievement of Indian foreign policy.

The Modi government's unique contribution to the policy of non-alignment is the addition of the concept of "multi-alignment" which may be seen as a variant of 'hedging' in international relations.<sup>15</sup> Through multi-alignment, India has sought to circumvent entanglement with any one great power, and this may have given New Delhi some diplomatic maneuvering space in the ongoing war in Ukraine. That is why there is growing appreciation of India's ability play the role of an honest mediator between Russia and Ukraine.

Most of the Western leaders do not want Putin to have the initiative to determine the dynamics of the Ukraine war. But nobody is sure as to what will force Putin to consider quitting the Ukraine war. Putin is unable to cut Russia's losses in this meaningless war because he has trapped himself in the sunk-cost fallacy. It has been argued that "Captured by the sunk-cost fallacy of war, badly constrained by his failed initial invasion, and with his future on the line, Putin will feed the bonfire until he either runs out of fuel or it consumes him. As he struggles to find both resources and rationales to continue his war, eventually Putin's meaningless war will, like so many before, come to

have national meaning in Russia as his false motives send tens of thousands of Russians to their real graves.”<sup>16</sup>

Although responding firmly, the US and NATO have not used direct military force against Russia, this caution has been due to apprehensions of nuclear escalation. Breaking the longstanding tradition of restraint on strategic nuclear weapons, Russia suspended implementation of the New START treaty in February 2023, cynically arguing that no “business as usual” could be conducted while the West is supporting Ukraine.<sup>17</sup> The fact that Russia felt compelled to breach the consensus of not brandishing the nuclear weapons in the heat of bilateral disagreements would be seen as evidence of breakdown of diplomatic relations between Washington and Moscow as well as of Putin’s dangerous attempts to endanger the nuclear order that has been in place for past half a century.<sup>18</sup> That is why the G-20’s Delhi Declaration has clearly mentioned that “use or threat of use of nuclear weapons is inadmissible.”<sup>19</sup>

It needs to be noted that on the sidelines of the SCO summit in Samarkand in September 2022, Prime Minister Modi had told Putin that today is not the era of war, while urging him to take the initiative in addressing the biggest problems of developing countries due to the conflict. These unexpected public remarks were even appreciated by the US.<sup>20</sup> During Prime Minister’s visit to the US in June 2023 to meet the US President Joe Biden, both the leaders “expressed their deep concern over the conflict in Ukraine and mourned its terrible and tragic humanitarian consequences. Both countries further pledge to render continuing humanitarian assistance to the people of Ukraine. They called for respect for international law, principles of the UN charter, and territorial integrity and sovereignty.”<sup>21</sup>

Referring to criticism of India’s refusal to take a clear stand against Russian aggression, Prime Minister Modi, in an interview with a French newspaper, remarked in July 2023 that “India’s stand has been clear, transparent and consistent. We have urged both sides to resolve issues through dialogue and diplomacy.” He also said that India is “deeply concerned about the impact of the conflict on the wider world, especially the Global South. The conflict must end.”<sup>22</sup>

India’s former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has also supported New Delhi’s stance on the Ukraine-Russia war, asserting that India has “done the right thing by prioritising its sovereign and economic interests while advocating for peace.”<sup>23</sup> Over the course of the Ukraine war, Prime Minister Modi has been in conversation with both Putin and Zelenskyy.

At the same time, New Delhi has been speaking regularly with Washington, London and France on how to resolve the conflict. It seems plausible that the key stakeholders are using India's neutrality to get messages across to the other side. Therefore, one should not get surprised if New Delhi becomes a venue for eventual peace talks between Russia and Ukraine. India seems ready to offer its diplomatic clout to coordinate the endgame in Ukraine.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

India growing power has been on full display at the global level in recent years. New Delhi has elevated its credibility in the global hierarchy of states. India has shown a remarkable ability to shape international platforms to provide solutions to common global challenges. Under Indian presidency, the G-20 Delhi declaration has called on nations to uphold international law, including territorial integrity and sovereignty and international humanitarian law. India's biggest satisfaction lies in delivering a Declaration that succeeded in keeping the G-20 together by preventing further geopolitical divisions on Ukraine war. Notwithstanding multiple disagreements among member states regarding the Ukraine war, the fact that it was possible to reach a consensus on endorsing the final document, should be viewed as India's great diplomatic achievement.

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